

RE - WRITING THE RUSSIAN CONQUEST OF CENTRAL ASIA

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Introduction. Between 1845 and 1895 roughly 1,500,000 square miles of territory in Central Asia were added to the Russian empire. Russia's expansion southwards across the Kazakh steppe into the riverine oases of Turkestan was one of the nineteenth century's most dramatic examples of imperial conquest, but remains under-researched and misinterpreted. This is partly because for many years Russia was not considered to be a "colonial" empire at all, as both western and Soviet historians claimed that the cultural and racial hierarchies of western colonialism were absent from the Tsar's domains. It is also because much of the material needed to study it was unavailable to western scholars.

Methodology. With the opening of the archives of the former USSR in 1991 and the simultaneous crumbling of Soviet historical dogma, it finally became possible for scholars to carry out serious empirical research on Russian rule over non-Russians. This has revealed that Russian imperialism was often strikingly similar to that of Britain or France.

Findings/discussion. The Russian conquest of Central Asia is usually understood either as an incidental outcome of the "Great Game" between Britain and Russia, or else as driven by economic considerations, principally the need of the Russian textile industry for secure markets and raw cotton. Both of these explanations are unsatisfactory: the first because it simply reflects British preoccupations with the defence of India, and ignores Central Asians themselves; the second because it is a product of Soviet dogma and entirely unsupported by evidence. Using materials from archives in Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Georgia and India, my research reveals a more complex story, one in which the British are less important, and the focus is on relations between the Russian empire, the Kazakh steppe nomads who were its nearest neighbours, and the Central Asian states of Bukhara, Khiva and Kokand. Through a series of microhistories of different stages of the Russian advance, I argue that the local priorities of the Russian military varied considerably depending on the terrain they encountered (steppe, mountain, irrigated oasis), the immediate political circumstances, and the personalities involved on both sides.

Conclusions. The common factor was the idea that Russia had to maintain her imperial prestige in the region at all costs, and could not afford to show any sign of weakness which would be pounced upon both by her "Asiatic" neighbours and by her European rivals as a sign of decline. We should understand the Russian conquest of Central Asia as a game of insecurities and competitive emulation, in which the Russians sought to prove on both a local and an international stage that they could maintain the status, the expected forms of behaviour, and the military and political repertoire, of an imperial "Great Power".

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